

4-17-09 Seattle PI - Grave markers restore patients' identity and dignity

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Anonymous no more:

Psychiatric patient graves get new headstones

By VANESSA HO
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Marked by a small, sunken, nameless stone, the grave was known as No. 447, one of thousands of anonymous tombs buried in the prairie-grass cemetery outside the state psychiatric hospital.

It belonged to a dementia patient who died at Western State Hospital in 1899 and remained unknown until 2005, when volunteers laid a granite headstone over it bearing the patient's identity: John Moore. He had been the first homesteader in what is now Des Moines.

"With each numbered stone we replace, we erase some of the stigma of mental illness and restore the dignity and respect of that person," said Laurel Lemke, a psychology associate at the hospital and the chairwoman of a group that has worked to identify the graves.

Over the years, the volunteers have placed identifying headstones on 620 of 3,200 anonymous graves in the Lakewood cemetery. They plan to place about 30 more headstones in a ceremony this Saturday.

The ceremonies often attract strangers to the departed, who have their own struggles with mental illnesses.

The ceremony this Saturday will be held from 9 a.m. to noon at the historical Western State Hospital Cemetery in Fort Steilacoom Park, at 8714 9th Ave. S.W., Lakewood. Another ceremony will be held at the same time on May 30.

"One person came forward and said, 'My son has a mental illness.' Another person came forward and said, 'I have depression,'" said Lemke, who said she has a bipolar disorder.

"As more people are willing to say, 'I have a mental illness,' it gives hope to other people."

Between 1876 and 1953, the hospital buried the patients in anonymous tombs identified by numbered concrete markers, in an effort to shield families from the shame of mental illness at the time. The misunderstanding of mental illness at the time is reflected in the hospital's history, which had been called the "Territorial asylum for the insane and idiotic."

In 2004, after much lobbying by Lemke's group, the Legislature passed a law that allowed for the disclosure of the patients' names. But it was the beginning of a long road.

The hospital gave the group an ancient handwritten, sometimes illegible, chronological roster, and a typewritten, transcribed one -- making positive identification far from certain.

To personalize the names, the group poured over thousands of microfiche records, trying to match dates of death and birth, when available. They found that the buried had been farmers, dairy workers, soldiers and parents. They learned that some had suffered from schizophrenia and developmental delays.

Matching the names to the tombs was another challenge. Many of the numbered markers, now crumbling, had sunk below the grass, requiring tracking devices and sticks to unearth them. Exposure to the elements then caused some of the numbers to fade away.

The group has since memorialized the remains of 500 people buried in three adjacent plots with a single stone that says, "Rest in Peace." John Moore's grave now has a headstone donated by the Des Moines Historical Society.

No. 1547 is now Julie Mekjavich, who was born in Yugoslavia and died in her 30s. No. 944 is Emma Rasmussen Hess, a mother who died in her early 40s in 1909.

"It's very meaningful work and it gives us a chance to tell people's stories," Lemke said. Volunteers include students, veterans and history buffs who have maintained the cemetery, researched records and donated money for headstones. A grassroots group of mental-health advocates, called the Greater Puget Sound Consumer Coalition, is also supporting much of the work.

Every once in while, Lemke gets calls from genealogists researching their family history. The other day, she was excited about a call from a man in search of the final resting place of his great-grandfather, Charles Cooley, a pioneer from Klickitat County who had fought in the Civil War.

He turned out to be No. 200.

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